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Ecological Theory, Protestant Theology, and Derek Mahon's Sense of the Natural World

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Abstract:

A close reading of Derek Mahon's ocean-grounded and meteorologically rounded poems with direct reference to his stance on ecology and the environment. The article argues that Mahon's sense of the natural world – and the ways in which it is under siege at the hands of man – finds a certain resemblance in his background as a Northern Irish Protestant who was brought up on a theology of apocalypse.

Keywords: Clouds, Ecology, Ocean, Protestantism, Weather

In “Day Trip to Donegal” (*NC* 22-23)¹ Mahon cites a pier as the point of arrival, and the point of departure, from whence fishermen unload their catches and where the difference between man and fish, as species, serves as a focal point of interest. The poem, and this is crucial when it comes to imagining a nuanced eco-narrative, provides a means of talking about ocean species that are endangered, if not under threat of extinction. Mahon recounts the suffering – the genocide – endured by indigenous fish populations allowing his poem to feature, as Patricia Horton puts it, “the continuing innocence which the fish exhibit despite mass slaughter” (Horton 2000, 355). Mahon makes it clear, throughout, that man is a destructive being endowed with a “land-mind” altogether different from the fish he catches, eats, and disposes of at will. The ironic stay of Mahon's line that “Theirs is a sea-mind, mindless upon land / And dead” leaves few, if any, doubts about his ecological politics concerning the treatment of the world's maritime “others”. Nor can there be any doubt that massive fishing quotas represent, for Mahon, a form of needless mass destruction that is, and this is what he finds most

¹ Please note that *NC* will be used as abbreviation for *Night Crossing* collection throughout.

remarkable, unremarkable to so many people: “Their systematic genocide / (Nothing remarkable that millions died) / To us is a necessity / For ours are land-minds, mindless in the sea”.

Peter Denman argues that “Day Trip to Donegal” spells out what are the “major themes” of Mahon’s poetry (1994, 36). Denman even goes so far as to say that the third stanza of “Day Trip to Donegal” “foreshadows” “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” except that “Day Trip to Donegal” takes as its central theme netted fish rather than mushrooms, fish “flopping about the deck / In attitudes of agony and heartbreak”. Peter McDonald, meanwhile, concentrates on how Mahon improved (McDonald’s term of choice) the rhetorical force of “Day Trip to Donegal” by excising the third stanza of his 1968 version claiming that this excision “improves the poem, cutting away as it does six lines of reflection on the fate of the landed fish” (McDonald 2002, 153). Other critics who have spent time on this verse include Magdalena Kay who ignores any and all pressing issues with reference to its fish populations and the depensation of keystone species (Kay 2012, 92). Christelle Serée-Chaussinand, like Kay, also ignores the ecological significance of the poem’s fish species as living species (Serée-Chaussinand 2012, 54) while Ruth G.D. Wilkinson, who does mention the poem’s fish quotas in passing, offers no further comment on, or concern for, the plight of the poem’s dying fish (1995, 256). What Wilkinson does concern herself with is the possible differences between “land minds” and “sea minds” by making a case for the argument that the poem’s land-minds are best construed as Northern and “obdurate” while its sea minds are best understood as Irish and “free” (*ibidem*). As an adjunct to her claim concerning “obdurate” vs. “free” Wilkinson explains that the poem serves to remind Mahon, as it does his readers, that “the colony to which he returns, can be ‘no one’s home’ ” (*ibidem*). Here are the first four stanzas from the earlier version of Mahon’s poem with the third stanza firmly in place:

We reached the sea in early afternoon,
Climbed stiffly out. There were urgent things to be done –
Clothes to be picked up, people to be seen.
As ever, the nearby hills were a deeper green
Than anywhere in the world, and the grave
Grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave.

Down at the pier the boats gave up their catch–
Torn mouths and spewed-up lungs. They fetch
Ten times as much in the city as there,
And still the fish come in year after year –
Herring and whiting, flopping about the deck
In attitudes of agony and heartbreak.
How could we hope to make them understand?

theirs is a sea-mind, mindless upon land
 And dead. Their systematic genocide
 (Nothing remarkable that millions died)
 To us is a necessity
 For ours are land-minds, mindless in the sea.

We left at eight, drove back the way we came,
 The sea receding down each muddy lane.
 Around midnight we changed-down into suburbs
 Sunk in a sleep no gale-force wind disturbs.
 The time of year had left its mark
 On frosty pavements glistening in the dark. (*Ibidem*)

Karen Marguerite Moloney also touches on the connection between land minds and sea minds with her extended reading of “Beached Whale” (*AAW* 30-31)² where man encounters an ocean species, in the likeness of an out-sized specimen whale, which has journeyed “league upon league of ocean” only to end up dying on Timoleague Strand³ (Moloney 2011, 179). By writing about a beached whale in this piece Mahon seizes a rare opportunity to compare the ocean deep, and one of its largest inhabitants, to life along the strand with the poem unfolding at a liminal staging ground with the whale “fluke-thrashing as she breathes her dying / breaths and gradually subsides / under the great weight of her own insides” (Mahon 2010, 30). Mahon never wants us to forget that there remain some discrete links between Ireland’s landlubbers and the beached whale: “the seas and rocks / we left to climb up on the burning shore”. Indeed, before moving on Mahon makes a real point of apostrophizing the “primordial” relationship between humans and whale in terms of “the soft human paw” (“the reflex of an unthinking fin / or a nerve twitching in primordial depths”) (31).

According to Eóin Flannery, Mahon’s beached whale does not “exist solely as the spare sum of its bodily parts” (Flannery 2016, 43). Flannery argues, instead, that even though the “great beast” might have caused a media frenzy onshore, Mahon’s sense of the whale’s “unseen submarine life takes precedence over these superficial treatments of its demise on land” (*ibidem*). Flannery also argues that we would be well advised to consider how Mahon’s “giant cetacean operates as a synecdoche in the poem, standing in as a representative figuration of all of the threatened species of global climate

² Please note that *AAW* will be used as abbreviation for *An Autumn Wind* throughout.

³ Not to put too fine a point on it, this poem is in places reminiscent of Mahon’s “Songs of Praise” (*Selected Poems*, 1991) which contrasts the reach of hymns along a rugged northern coastline, “Outside, the hymn dies among rocks and dunes. / Conflicting rhythms of the incurious”, and how somewhere in the vastness a whale – a “beleaguered whale”, no less – serves as a maritime counterpoint to a terrestrial hymnal with its “Trombone dispatches”.

change” (*ibidem*). Flannery concludes by stating that the whale, by “Defying the anthropocentric thoroughfares of the oceans”, has, in a very real sense, superseded “the maps that structure and delineate the planet’s marine expanses” (*ibidem*):

Out of her depths now, her rorqual pleats
ivory fading to grey as the tide retreats,
her brain at rest, with her huge size
she has admirers in her drowsy eyes –
surfers and tourists, children, families
who never saw a whale before;
and the news cameras, RTÉ, Channel 4.

A tired eye closes after so many years,
so much experience, travel, league upon league
of ocean, wild sunrises and sunsets,
tropical storms, long vistas, wind and stars;
and she gives up the ghost
not in the unfathomable dark forest
of sea, but here on the strand at Timoleague.

Pliny thought dolphins beached for love of man,
aspiring to human life. A might beast
like this has other reasons (pheromone,
exhaustion, age), yet when she gasps her last
bad breath on the glassy sand she gives
her body to flensing knives
and the flesh falls away in heavy leaves –

source once of lamp oil, glue and candle grease.
Dead of some strange respiratory disease,
reduced to the rib-cage of an old wreck,
entrails strewn on mud, the stomach
stripped and the organs – heart, liver
and lights – retrieved for research, she knows we aim to make a study of her;

to study the cortex, the skin thick and thin,
her ancient knowledge of the seas and rocks
we left to climb up on the burning shore
and still revisit in dreams and sex,
where the soft human paw
has the reflex of an unthinking fin
or a nerve twitching in primordial depths. (Mahon 2010)

In this, as in so much else, it is worth looking at Elizabeth Bishop’s considerable influence on Mahon’s ocean-disposed poems by way of verses like

“The Fish” and “At the Fishhouses” (Bishop 1983). Bishop is also worth taking into account, as Patricia Yeager does, that Bishop’s poems not only serve as a means of entering the hidden potentialities of the ocean but also to get a handle on better understanding man’s role in defining, and defiling, the ocean at large. It is, after all, Elizabeth Bishop who made an early and determined effort to replace land-based maps (viz. “The Map”) with a poetic vision that positions “the land” differently: “Land lies in water; it is shadowed green” (*ibidem*). As Yeager likes to put it, this decision to reappropriate the ocean and what the oceanic represents, and this is also clear from reading “At the Fishhouses”, helps to restore it as a rich site for “contemplating the tragedy of the oceanic commons” (Yeager 2010, 533). The same site, or sites, continues Yeager, introduces us, more accurately, exposes us, to the possibilities of ocean studies and the challenges that such studies present when it comes to putting the ocean’s “agitation and historicity” back into play (538). All this clearly makes sense to Mahon who, writing in *Olympia and the Internet* (“The Swimmer as Hero”), explains that “the fate of streams and rivers is to become sea, the greatest earthly myth, the largest tangible thing (three quarters of the globe) and our best personal experience of the infinite” (Mahon 2017, 57).

As well as Bishop, Rachel Carson should also be counted another important influence on Mahon’s thinking. Lawrence Buell once said that any authentic understanding of life on our planet should begin with Carson (Buell 1998, 645). Buell also says that Carson and her successors have been instrumental in reviving “a long-standing mythography of betrayed Edens” (*ibidem*). It should come as no surprise, then, that Mahon’s long-held admiration for Carson whose famous eco-paeon, *Silent Spring* (1962), was preceded by *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), led him to choose the following lines, from *The Edge of the Sea*, as epigraph to “Harbour Lights”: “I ... a mere newcomer whose ancestors had inhabited the earth so briefly that my presence was almost anachronistic” (*HL*, 61-67)⁴. So there we have it. Mahon is a big fan of Carson as required reading. And this is something he makes altogether clear in “Bashō in Kinsale” (*HL*, 46-47) where he writes, in memo to self, “Desert island books: / Homer and Rachel Carson, / Durable hardbacks”. The same Carson influence is also something that permeates Mahon’s wide-ranging observations in one of his recent articles from Gallery Press, called “Rubbish Theory”, about how our seas have become dumping grounds for all kinds of waste:

We hear of a sea of rubbish, hundreds of miles wide, in the Pacific.
 Inquire further and you find this is only one of several in the oceans,
 albeit the largest, and is actually composed of two, the interacting
 East and West Pacific Gyres that combine to make up the Great Pacific

⁴ Please note that *HL* will be used as abbreviation for *Harbour Lights* throughout.

Garbage Patch north of Hawaii. It sounds benign, like “baggage patch”, but is quite the opposite. Rotating slowly in a clockwise direction, it draws in plastics since these aren’t biodegradable; the rest sinks to the sea floor to join an even bigger, underwater rubbish dump. Most of this debris comes from land-based activities, the rest from shipping and offshore oil rigs. Non-biodegradable but photodegradable, plastics are reduced by sunlight and gradually break down into tiny pieces resembling marine organisms, often mistaken for food by birds and fish. When they swallow these non-nutrients they swallow, too, toxic chemicals the plastic has absorbed, and these enter the food chain. (2017, 22)

Christelle Serée-Chaussinand maintains that Mahon is, almost more than anything else, concerned with betrayed places that are linked to the myriad seascapes for which he has a firm and lasting “predilection” (Serée-Chaussinand 2012, 51). To advance her analysis, Serée-Chaussinand enters Ireland’s oceanic sites as sites possessing a number of important features having to do with liminality and seminality (*ibidem*). Serée-Chaussinand devotes a great deal of time to looking at seashores because such shores prove to be ideal media for Mahon to express “a pervading sense of loss and estrangement and more generally the ambivalent affiliation between his self and place” (*ibidem*). For Serée-Chaussinand, then, it is imperative that we come to grips with the exponential significance of Ireland’s coastlines where ocean and land encounter one another along a “dividing line” which is as much epistemological as it is real (52). And perhaps one of the most important features of this dividing line is what Serée-Chaussinand, talking about the approximate relationship between sea, strand, and debris, is how Mahon often envisions the sea-strand encounter as a matrix which presages “alternative histories” (57).

The same kinds of sea/strand sites, ebb and flow, also allow for the distinct possibility that scattered beaches, sporadic shores, and incoming seas stir an elsewhere of cultural memories in a world which is inclined to deal with the “old ghosts of its past by banning such reminders to the margins” (Dietrich 2007, 457). It is therefore no coincidence that one of Mahon’s all-time favorite seaside haunts is a mutant strand which serves as a storehouse, or, if preferred, ecological archive. In “Dreams of a Summer Night” (*NCP*, 372-377)⁵ Mahon writes (with an obvious nod to Hopkins) about “So many quiet shores ‘bleared, smeared with toil’ ” (“the unchecked invasion of crude oil / dumped on the sand by a once friendly tide”). This “invasion of crude oil”, coupled with an apt reference to “unthickly wooded shores”, has not changed much since Mahon wrote about detritus and diesel in “April on Toronto Island” (*NC* 30). Mahon also recounts, in “April on Toronto Island”,

⁵ Please note that *NCP* will be used as abbreviation for *New Collected Poems* throughout.

how “Slowly, in ones and twos”, a local populace is set to come back and “stand on the thin beach among the / Washed-up flotsam of the winter” (*ibidem*).

Joanna Kruczkowska points out that even though Michael Longley has “long occupied a dominant position” as Ireland’s leading nature poet, it is in Mahon’s work that seascapes figure most prominently (Kruczkowska 2012, 71). Kruczkowska also underscores the fact that it is Mahon who is especially adept at rendering the “polluted, industrial areas of harbours and docks” as evidenced by the aforementioned “April on Toronto Island”, as well as “On the Beach” and “Afterlives” (*ibidem*). To lend further support to her claim about “polluted, industrial areas of harbours and docks”, Kruczkowska cites Mahon’s “Aphrodite’s Pool” (*TYB* 37-38)⁶ because it is a poem that gives first-hand access to seafronts, properly speaking, “man-made” seafronts, in Greece (*ibidem*). It is this particular emphasis, writes Kruczkowska, that links Elytiss’ Aegean to the “industrial version of the Irish seascape” Mahon turns to in his own verse (72). Kruczkowska is convinced that in writing “Aphrodite’s Pool” Mahon devises a means of challenging the standard expectations and expectancies of pastoral convention and therefore gains entry to an alternative discourse on the sea; challenges the age old conventions surrounding the pastoral as it relates to the land and so encourages a far more open exchange having to do with the ocean, the sea, and the rest (73).

Terence Brown augments this reading of harbours and docks by setting us straight about how often Mahon is drawn to the pleasures of “miscellaneous ports” in things like “Harbour Lights” (*HL* 61-67) where he talks about his current residence, or, to be exact, the nearest quay to his home: “dark oil-drums and fish boxes on the quay, / winches and ropes, intestines of the sea/ alive with the stench of prehistoric water” (Brown 2003, 139). In the same poem, Mahon also comments on how “Slick boats click at the quayside down below” and how much he likes to study “the visible lines of tidal flow”. As far as Michael O’Neill is concerned such narrative constructs – whenever they wash up against the “margins” – are instrumental in helping Mahon incorporate the sea or one of its semiological equivalents to accentuate “the limits of locality, the relativism of any notion of ‘home’” (O’Neill 1983, 58). At the same time, his extensive use of littoral spaces and species, plus the vast openness of the sea, stirs us to question any number of assumptions embedded in traditional Irish discourse. This is what happens in “Beyond Howth Head” where the Irish Sea serves as both barrier and conduit – “Channel” – as a mode of shoring up “Unbosomings of sea-weed, wrack/ Industrial bile”. Related leftovers, flotsam or jetsom, are part of “A Hermit” (*TSP* 26)⁷, later called “The Mayo Tao” (*P* 72-

⁶ Please note that *TYB* will be used as abbreviation for *The Yellow Book* throughout.

⁷ Please note that *TSP* will be used as abbreviation for *The Snow Party* throughout.

73)⁸, where Mahon introduces himself as “a confidant of the stinking shore”. And then there is “North Sea” (*P* 92-97), Part 4 of “Light Music”, which celebrates, if celebration it be, “The terminal light of beaches, / pebbles speckled with oil; / old tins at the tide-line”. In similar mode, and this in a kind of back to the future, Mahon talks about “black beaches” in “The Great Wave” (*AAW* 77) and how such beaches offer you, if you are prepared to count “raw material” to be a kind of neo-resource, infinite possibilities in the making – “If ‘waste is the new raw material’ as they say / our resources are infinite”.

Mahon is clearly an aficionado of the sea and the bountiful measure of its variegated strands. He is also, as John Kerrigan puts it, a “connoisseur” of detritus (Kerrigan 1992, 257). And in this, at least, he sometimes echoes James Joyce in his decision to use the leftovers of near-shores and read, as Joyce has it in the Proteus episode of *Ulysses*: “Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, nearing the tide, that rusty boot” (McGuinness 2012, 4). This is, after all, the same Joyce who, as Michelle McSwiggen notes in her article, “Oceanic Longings: An Ecocritical Approach to Joyce”, has Mulligan refer to the sea as “our greater mother”, has Stephen count the sea “a stern, colonial, fatherly figure”, and has Gerty’s “attitude toward the sea” serve as an almost “perfect example of the British construction of the picturesque” (McSwiggen 2009, 138). A related sense of the sea, expressed in one or more of these paradigmatic types, is to be found in an early Mahon poem called “Straight Lines Breaking Becoming Circles” (1970) where Joyce is nothing if not an obvious influence: “You have walked by the sea / and heard the groan / of sea-desire / on railway stone / and watched the scrotum- / tightening, laced / with whistling spin- / drift” (Mahon 1969, 20).

Dan Brayton, talking about Shakespeare, provides a hardcore reminder that “Ecocritical scholarship to date has been almost entirely terrestrial in outlook” (Brayton 2011, 173). Brayton continues, and with just cause, to point out that a great many introductions to ecocriticism/environmental criticism contain “barely a mention of the sea or its denizens” (174). Because of this, continues Brayton, the sea as it has been envisaged in the course of intellectual history “has long been constructed as a non-place, and extra-social network that lies eternally outside – or on the margins – of history” (180). At one point Brayton likens the sea in Shakespeare to “a space of invisibility and unknowing, where the limitations of sight undermine epistemological certainty” (Shakespeare’s ocean “remains an immense blind spot”) (178-179). Considering Brayton’s prime research interest, it is anything but surprising that he regards Shakespeare’s “global ocean” as eschatologically suggestive. So suggestive, in fact, that he deems the Shakespearean ocean, in its geographic “alterity”, to be something akin to “the epistemological *eschatia*, lying beyond the conceptual pale” (190).

⁸ Please note that *P* will be used as abbreviation for *Poems 1962-1968* throughout.

As far as Mahon is concerned (and no claim here that his seas are the same as Shakespeare's) his preferred iterations of the sea involve a purposive sense of otherness; an infused sense of seascape that cannot be assimilated, at least not in standard kind, as part of the status quo back home. It is, apart from anything else, something of an untold expanse which, in the "Harbour Lights" (*HL* 61-67), speaks of "the open sea". At other times Mahon's seas emerge as if from a troubling realm with him identifying, as he does in "Craigvara House" (*ANT* 15-17)⁹, the North's "rough / sea". There is also, at times, something quite ominous about some of his seas. Just take, as example, the case of "Glengormley" (*NC* 5) which hosts "conspiring seas", or in "North Wind: Portrush" (*HBN* 12-13)¹⁰, which mentions a faraway sea that is "scarred but at peace". There is, as well, the "vigilant sea" of "What Will Remain" (*L* 26-27)¹¹, the "black-and-blue / Atlantic" of "Beyond Howth Head" (*L* 33-38), the "desolate sea" of "A Hermit" (*TSP* 26), the "stormy Irish sea" of "River Rhymes" (*THL* 23-24)¹² and the "violent seas" ("the whole shocking / reach of the Atlantic") that give definition to "At the Butler Arms" (*AAW* 32-33) – "not calm, contemplative ease / but violent seas".

According to Enrico Reggiani, Mahon's frequent encounters with, more properly, his references to the sea foster a "perimetral" sense of space as a "transitional area where man confronts with otherness" (1996, 203). To do this Mahon tries to envision oceanic expanses that are not just offshore but perhaps nowhere to be seen. This is true of "The Sea in Winter" (*P* 109-114) which asks us to peer "Far out" to where "the Atlantic faintly breaks" and imagine, if possible, the "Chaste winter-gardens of the sea / Glimmering to infinity". Jerzy Jarniewicz chimes in that whenever it comes to talking about such seas and their transformative horizons "No other place can be further from human society, no other approximates more conspicuously the idea of the beyond" (Jarniewicz 2002, 92). In Jarniewicz's view Mahon's sea vistas thus establish a gratuitous sense of elsewhere which helps us rethink our long-standing assumptions about place as being, first and foremost, the prerogative of "the land" (*ibidem*). As for Mahon himself, well, as he explains it in his article, "Horizons", the rise of 19th-century imperialism "gave horizons a new significance" which, give or take, brings us to question what it is all about: "surrounded by land horizons (a line of hills, fields, houses, woods), why do we think primarily of *sea* horizons? Because they're open, and because popular culture of the early 20th century, heyday of ocean travel, looked on them with such favour" (2017, 77).

⁹ Please note that *ANT* will be used as abbreviation for *Antarctica* throughout.

¹⁰ Please note that *HBN* will be used as abbreviation for *The Hunt by Night* throughout.

¹¹ Please note that *L* will be used as abbreviation for *Lives* throughout.

¹² Please note that *THL* will be used as abbreviation for *The Hudson Letter* throughout.

Eamonn Hughes believes that this abiding obsession with the sea's vastness and its unspoken mysteries exemplifies how much those who hail from a Northern Protestant background are "sea-obsessed" (2002, 104). And this is something Hughes talks about with direct reference to the triumvirate that is Mahon, MacNeice and Paulin; how, for these three poets, the sea functions as an expression of the "Protestant conscience" (*ibidem*). Ruth G.D. Wilkinson, exploring the same phenomenon points out how, and how often, Mahon's relatives saw entry into the merchant navy as an occupational choice that offered "possible transcendence of the North's restrictions" (Wilkinson 1995, 225). Such an abiding interest in all things ocean-bound appears in Mahon's "My Wicked Uncle" (*NC* 8-9) where one of his uncles is described as the "crookedest chief steward in the Head Line". There is also, in "Resistance Days" (*HL* 13-18), some further talk of his uncles – plural – as part of "a whole raft of Merchant Navy engineers, / northern barbarians on the Barbary coast / in their white ducks, a far cry from Belfast". Even the memories of his father-in-law, in the eponymously titled "Father-in-Law" (*P* 59-60), tack in pretty much the same direction: "I think we would have had a lot in common – / Alcohol and the love of one woman / Certainly; but I failed the eyesight test / When I tried for the Merchant Navy, / And lapsed into this lyric lunacy". Mahon also has a few things to say, in prose form, about how the men in his family were forever *concentrated* (his term) on life at sea and that if it hadn't been for his poor eyesight he, too, would have headed off to sail the seven seas:

All the men in the family were concentrated on ships
and the sea, except for those of us who were half-blind.
I wanted to go to sea myself, so I was taken down to the
Custom House in Belfast when I was about sixteen and
given a preliminary examination, which involved looking
at the chart on the wall. You know: O, X, Z, Q. The doctor
said, "Read off the chart on the wall". So I said, "What
chart?" And that was the end of my seafaring career.
(Murphy, McDiarmid, Durkan 1999 [1991], 187)

A number of Mahon's seas and sea lanes also read like traces along which readers might spy, if lucky, ocean-going vessels as they make their way across a seemingly unfettered expanse. This is a world apart. Part free enterprise zone and part open sea it is dotted with random sightings as when, in the aforementioned "My Wicked Uncle", Mahon recalls seeing "empty freighters" (from the shoreline) "Sailing for ever down Belfast Lough / In a fine rain, their sirens going" (*NC* 8-9). This kind of sighting, once removed, is also found in "Derry Morning" where we catch a fleeting glimpse of a freighter which is tagged as a "Russian freighter bound for home" (*HBN* 11). Also included in Mahon's roster of ocean-going vessels is the "odd somnolent freighter" that is said to pass just off Rathlin in "Rathlin Island" (*HBN* 16), or, in a more re-

cent posting, a frigate that sits “on a glittering sea” in “Biographia Literaria” (*LOE* 13-14)¹³. There are also, scattered here and there, a few references to passenger ships. This is what we get in “A Dark Country” (*L* 18) where a ship is said to turn “among buoys in dawn rain / To slide into a dockyard fluorescence”. Almost the exact same maneuver, accompanied by another bout of rain, is on offer in “Afterlives” (*TSP* 1-2) when a “ship trembles, turns / In a wide arc to back / Shuddering up the grey lough” (vague in aspect, said ship winds up moving “past lightship and buoy, / Slipway and dry dock / Where a naked bulb burns”).

These manifold references to ships at sea, vessels on the horizon, or ships about to dock, are as close as Mahon ever gets to actually exploring the sea in, for want of a better word, the rough. One partial exception to this, in Mahon’s work, might be his meditations on the fate of the Titanic. To wit, at one point we find ourselves “at sea” in “The Titanic” where Mahon entertains talk of “the grave ocean” (1961). This, coupled with another Titanic piece about Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line, “As God is my Judge” (*NC* 31), once again offers some semblance of being on the water: “As I sat shivering on the dark water / I turned to ice to hear my costly / Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of / Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches”. These Titanic poems, apart, most of Mahon’s seas, far from being lived in, are reminiscent of things like Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”, with its Sea of Faith and “forlorn vastness”, “Religious Isolation” and its “complaining sea”, “Human Life” with its “incognisable sea” (Arnold 1963). The same seas also remind us at times of people like Swinburne who, in “By the North Sea”, beckons the sea (or has it beckon?) with Dunwich as backdrop.

In a few words or less, Mahon’s sea poems are a long way away from the rough-hewn dirges of London, Conrad, or Melville who wrote with a level of first-hand experience about life and livelihood on the high seas. This last point is taken up by Kristin Morrison who writes that there are, at the present time, “no Irish Joseph Conrads, no Irish Herman Melvilles” (2006, 112): that in her opinion the sea, of late, has served as “a psychological rather than a physical route” in the literary texts of today¹⁴. Fran Brearton feels, when it comes to talking about the sea in this or any other guise, that it is use-

¹³ Please note that *LOE* will be used as abbreviation for *Life on Earth* throughout.

¹⁴ While Morrison is of course right, it should be said, if only as hasty footnote, that a poet like Richard Murphy deserves some recognition as a sailor and devotee of the off-coast West and its rugged swells. This closeness to life on the sea is readily available in a string of Murphy poems – “The Last Galway”, “Theodore Roethke at Inishbofin”, “Seals at High Island”, “Omey Island”, “Nocturne”, “High Island”, “Sea Holly”, “Planter Stock” – all of which tack close to an enlivened sense of the ocean in ways that Mahon never records per swells, tidal hazards, raging waters, heaving seas, oversized waves. See Murphy 2001, 19-22, 27-28, 83-84, 87, 102, 112, 134, 174.

ful to draw a close comparison between Mahon and Alastair Reid in order to tease out how their seas involve a number of meteorological issues which Brearton refers to as some of the most “dominant motifs” at work in both writers (Brearton 2008, 164). For Brearton, then, Reid’s “frustration” with the Calvinist culture of Scotland is almost identical to Mahon’s strained relationship with Protestantism/Calvinism in Northern Ireland. Brearton writes that this sense of denominational “frustration” is something which stirs both poets to relish “an elemental flux set in opposition to their respective communities of origin, sometimes, in stormy weather, embodying the imminent apocalypse” (*ibidem*). Drawing a close parallel between Mahon’s “In Belfast” (NC 6) and Reid’s “The Village” (1953), Brearton makes the point that by emphasizing weather conditions – “in concert with how both writers handle seascapes” – is to do nothing more than acknowledge that those who describe Mahon “as more a meteorological than a geographical poet correctly identify a preoccupation that he and Reid unquestionably share” (Brearton 2008, 163). Brearton also feels it is critical to make the point that over the course of Mahon’s distinguished career “the ‘sea-wind’ and the rain” have remained “unpredictable elements evocative of that ‘unconscious chaos’, the potential embodiment of ‘cosmic apocalypse’” (166).

To say, as Brearton does, that Mahon is a “meteorological” poet is to do nothing more than state the obvious considering how often his seas and seascapes involve recurring meteorological elements which, in turn, promise an introduction to a world contingent in form and infinite in scale (163). Eamonn Hughes, in sync with Brearton, agrees that Mahon is much more a “meteorological” than he is a geographical poet (Hughes 2002, 99). A consideration that brings us to a large assortment of verses including a dark portrait of Belfast Lough in “Death in Bangor” with its “great drifts of rain” (TYB 51-52), “North Wind: Portrush” (HBN 12-13), where we find “Everything swept so clean / By tempest, wind and rain”, and the raw precipitation of “During the War” (HL 31-32) where rain is said to ring “with a harsh, deliberate chime / on scrap iron, plastic and depleted tin”. The same inclement weather conditions are also, and no coincidence here, part of “Ecclesiastes” (L 3) with its steadfast and inglorious January rains darkening “the dark doors and sink hard / into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped / graves of your fathers”.

A similar sense of meteorological darkness is also a part of “After the Storm” (AAW 28-29) which recounts what took place after a massive storm hit Cork in recent years: “No one had imagined / embankments would give way under the surge, / the River Lee engulfing market towns’ / water mains, drains and residential lanes”. Far from the floods of Munster, Mahon considers another troubling meteorological event in the Florida Keys with “Key West” (THL 69-71) and how “cloud-splitting Angie broke over the Keys last year / in June, the earliest ever, bringing torrential rains”. To talk about such

phenomena Mahon references local media coverage to put things in some perspective: "Why so soon in the season? Newspapers and TV / spoke of 'El Niño', the fabulous, hot tide-thrust / born in December off Peru like the infant Christ / sea-changing all with its rough magic". At the heart of this El Niño analysis there is also a real opportunity to ponder not only how rain formations ("the fabulous, hot tide-thrust / born in December off Peru") effect life on the rest of the planet but how weather patterns augur ill for what is going on several leagues under the sea:

... Uh-oh, before dawn it came around again,
 fat drops hitting on storm lanterns, demented budgies
 screeching beyond the pool and the churning trees;
 and I pictured the vast turmoil undersea,
 a mute universe of sponge and anemone,
 of conch and snapper, octopus and algae,
 odd fish of every stripe in their coral conservatories,
 while counting the stiff electric chimes of St. Mary's,
 Star of the Sea.

In a follow-up to this meteorological verse Mahon asks, in "The Seasons" (*AAW* 26-27), "What weird weather can we expect this July? Tornado, hail, some sort of freak tempest?". He also draws a line between the rainfall of yesteryear and recent weather conditions as evidence of a planet under incredible stress. This is something he does, and does to great effect, in "London Rain" (*LOE* 52-53), where he authors an open statement that "this is a new rain, / the rainmakers have sent, / corporate and imported / to swamp a continent". What Mahon calls, in "America Deserta" (*TYB* 46-48), "the general new-age weather", finds him connecting the dots and identifying a "global-warming age / of corporate rule" as the real culprit for the ecological woes and interdebilitating global crises which far exceed national borders and threaten all the planet's living inhabitants, human or non-human, oceanic or terrestrial, on a scale that is endless in proportion and devastating in extent.

Nicholas Grene cites Mahon's firm desire to address these and other ecological concerns as a sign of him turning away from modern society and its pre-assigned talking points to more forcefully analyze what is threatening the planet's diverse but interlinked ecologies (Grene 2007, 25). Grene further observes that Mahon has, on more than one occasion, raided European literature, for example, the "meteorological explanations" of Lucretius (with a particular focus on the talk of clouds) in such things as *De Rerum Natura* (27). Grene continues with an enlarged statement that whereas Yeats and Shakespeare were inclined to use "cloud compositions for the fading of self and being" Mahon is much more inclined to use such manifold cloudscapes to "function as metaphors for identity at the frontier of non-existence, where socially and nationally specific markers become irrelevant" (28). Elmer Ken-

neddy-Andrews says something similar to Grene writing, at one point, that Mahon's reliance on such cloud formations, as compared to "fixed views of the world", indicate how much he wants to take refuge in "ever-changing symbols of a world beyond the 'mud and junk' of 'earthly intercourse'" (Kennedy-Andrews 2008, 175).

Mahon's lifelong devotion to clouds and cloud-inspired typologies rather than "earthly intercourse" is at times reminiscent of John Ruskin who, as Jonathan Bate points out, himself learned from Wordsworth "how to look at clouds" and, in so doing, reached the conclusion "that the weather was undergoing radical change" (Bate 1991, 61). Michael Wheeler believes that some of Ruskin's grimmest meteorological entries were informed by a host of apocalyptic texts and that this is most evident in *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884) wherein he is troubled by a growing realization that "cloud formations may have been affected by industrial pollution" (Wheeler 1995, 169). This reference to what is now called man's carbon footprint saw Ruskin lean on select passages from scripture as a means of reading "the signs of the skies" and linking the evils of eco-degradation and the prophecies contained in *The Book of Revelation*: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him" (179, 184).

Although Mahon's capacious cloud references are less overtly scriptural than those of Ruskin, his cloud tracts are no less millenarian in their sense of urgent moment as evidenced by "Harbour Lights" (*HL* 6-67) which touches on clouds and cloud thoughts as "an alternative / to the global shit-storm that we know and love". More, Mahon's resolute desire to secure an "alternative / to the global-shit storm" is set against a growing perception that such alternatives are difficult to sustain since increased "levels of aviation" have retarded even "this vague resolution". Mahon also makes it perfectly clear that at this stage of the proceedings (environmentally speaking) "not even the ethereal clouds are quite immune" since they, too, "will be marketed if it can be done" Mahon recently took this, his long-held fascination with clouds, and turned it into an article entitled (well, what else?) "Clouds". Mahon begins this piece on clouds by noting that "cloud science" was initiated by Luke Howard (1772-1864) who published "On the Modifications of Clouds" in 1803 (Mahon 2017, 28). He says that Howard paid a great deal of attention to "cloud species and varieties" (hence "Cloud Nine") and tried throughout the course of his many observations to recognize "some order in the nubilous chaos" (*ibidem*).

From Howard, Mahon turns to draw a contrast between Goethe and Yeats noting that while Goethe "delighted" in Howard's scientific approach, Yeats "belonged to what we might call the indeterminate school" (30). Whatever the notion that Yeats might not have been taken by clouds to the same extent, or in the same fashion, as Goethe, Mahon remarks that even his

“spring” cloud use was “forceful” since it represented an important “aspect of his Celtic-twilit relish for dramatic weather conditions” (29): Throughout, in fact, Mahon argues that “cloud wisdom” brings with it the “authority of the indeterminate”; that clouds signify an alternative to “organization and number, to the monetarization of life and the rule of system” (“clouds are real” – “ephemeral but substantial”) (28, 33). Not only does Mahon provide an introduction to clouds in the 21st Century with “Clouds” but he also references some salient differences between the clouds that pass over the South of Ireland and those that pass over and hence, in their manner, define the North. And for Mahon, at least, the most salient difference between these regional cloud formations begins with talk of Kinsale’s cirrus, stratus, cumulus, and “night-shining clouds” (32). Immediately afterwards, he compares the “fleecy flocks” of Kinsale with the dark storm clouds that hang over the North and in particular along the Antrim and Derry coasts where the heart “quails at the violent, as it were apocalyptic, contrast between earth and sky”. Down South, meanwhile, things are much more “beautiful”: “Down here it’s milder, more domesticated, more beautiful than sublime; but vast fleecy flocks, surprising as Aristophanes’ cloud chorus, are often framed in my desk window as if to establish a context” (32-33).

In all this searching – searching out “the violent, as it were apocalyptic, contrast between earth and sky” – Mahon tries, as should be patently obvious by now, to make the planet’s non-human environments more and more available as talking points of lasting import. In so doing, he asks his readers to consider the oft-forgotten tenet that natural histories are an undeniable part of human history: that the environment is not some kind of external commodity but constitutes, in real time and in real terms, an amazing totality involving co-evolution between species whether those species are meteorological, oceanic, or other. Eóin Flannery readily agrees that Mahon’s poetic is by any reasonable standard, in both the heavens and on the earth, ecological (Flannery 2012, 176). Flannery states that Mahon approaches “environmental history” from a far more green perspective than most of his Irish contemporaries (*ibidem*). Flannery takes this claim one step further when he announces, in unabridged form, that in sequences like “Homage to Gaia” (*LOE* 44-58) Mahon produces “one of the most explicit examples of the coincidence of ecoconsciousness and poetry in contemporary Irish writing” (*ibidem*). Richard Rankin Russell agrees that Mahon’s “critique of the excesses of global capitalism, including the damage wrought upon our environment, has attained a laser-like clarity and is suffused with outrage” (Russell 2012, 488). And then, almost as if in response to all the naysayers who have berated Mahon’s eco-poems as sub-par, Russell states that he is “one of our very greatest nature poets” (*ibidem*).

Sadly, Flannery and Rankin are in something of a minority when it comes to recognizing Mahon as a poet who has had an abiding interest in

the things of the environment. David Wheatley, for example, in a negative review of Mahon's *New Collected Poems* makes a real point of saying that Mahon's eco-poems are responsible "for some of the weakest things" in the collection before adding that "something about Mahon the eco-poet does not quite add up for me" (Wheatley 2012, 7). Billy Ramsell, in a review of the same collection, also dismisses Mahon's abiding interest in environmental issues calling him a "cookie-cutter environmentalist" (Ramsell 2011-2012). Seán Lysaght, in a discussion of Mahon's work, more specifically "Resistance Days", takes a similar stance writing that "there is something not quite convincing about Mahon's espousal of 'the real chaos of indifferent nature'" (Lysaght 2011, 76). For critics like Wheatley, Ramsell, and Lysaght, and all the other critics who have dismissed Mahon's work on the grounds that his interest in, or commitment to, environmental issues is a new fad or pseudo-intellectual enterprise, it is worth pointing out, and this can't be said enough, that Mahon started writing eco-poems long before it ever became fashionable to talk about ecology and the environment in Ireland.

As long ago as 1982, in fact, Mahon's "Globe in North Carolina" (*HBN* 61-63) included mention of everything from "the hot dust of the piedmont" to "Audubon's / Bird prints" in addition to foregrounding the exigencies of natural life on the planet as a whole. Some several years before "The Globe in North Carolina", poems like "A Refusal to Mourn" (*TSP* 32-34) were also grounded, circa 1975, in the stuff of global ecologies with Mahon situating his protagonist's residence as a place inundated with the signs and presence of nature. Violeta Delgado points out, in her extended reading of "A Refusal to Mourn", that it is a poem which envisions the human condition *in terms of* its connections to nature in all its forms. Delgado argues that it is precisely because of Mahon's long-held beliefs about the natural world's irreducible links to "mankind" (and vice versa) that towards the end of "A Refusal to Mourn" the poem's central figure, upon dying, is seen to be at one with the natural elements of which he is an indivisible part (Delgado 1997, 58). Taking her argument one step further, Delgado proposes that the poem's elderly protagonist, through death, actually serves to "annihilate the linear conception of time in favor of the eternally recurring cycle of life and death" (*ibidem*). Hence, the main reason Mahon "refuses" to mourn the death of the poem's elderly figure is because "the man is part of the cycle that allows death and life to succeed each other continually" (59).

Far more recent in aspect, Mahon's essay, "Indian Ink", relates how after visiting India – an experience that had a direct bearing on writing "Homage to Goa" (*LOE* 60-61), "Air India" (*AAW* 22), and "Raw Material" (*AAW* 69) – he was moved to a much deeper appreciation of Gaia theory and so came to embrace the central eco-tenet that we are all part of *atma*, "the world breath or soul" (Mahon 2012, 270). This actuated sense of *atma* finds Mahon casting himself as an Ulster poet who thinks "We're cleverer than the monkeys

in most ways, but one with them in spirit at some level; one, too, with all organic and even inorganic life" (*ibidem*). Such a co-incarnational approach (unlike the fundamental Calvinist belief in Cartesian dualities between human and other) reminds us, or should, that we are indeed an integral part of nature (*ibidem*). As evidence of same, Mahon, in the course of "Homage to Gaia" (*LOE* 44-58), renews his ecological commitment by expressing his overt, and utter, disgust for the havoc that *homo sapiens* has wreaked on the planet in search of global dominance and international profit.

Calling Gaia "our first mother" in Poem 2 of the "Homage to Gaia" sequence, entitled "Homage to Gaia", Mahon rails against a human species that has done everything in its power to destroy "the woods / with crazy chainsaws, oiled / the sea, burned, up the clouds, upset the natural world / to grow fat". What Mahon also does in "Homage to Gaia", this time in Part 1, entitled "Its Radiant Energies", is to have solar panels represent something animate in the making: "What you notice about / the panes is their composure, / their heliotropic quiet". But what really shines through in "Its Radiant Energies" is the means by which Mahon's panes seek out light and how he has his poem's heliotropic panes cry out, "send us warmth and light!" ("light drinking polysilicon / raises its many faces / to worship the hot sun"). Edmund Prestwich thinks this particular poem's narrative could have been culled from a scientific paper with lines that feel altogether comfortable talking about "an average annual / thousand kilowatt hours / per photovoltaic panel" (2010). John McAuliffe adds to this ongoing exchange about Mahon's "light drinking polysilicon" by delivering a few remarks on how Mahon's ecologies celebrate, with "gusto", "the coming post-petroleum age" and anticipate, with grace, "the first hymns to alternative energy supplies" (McAuliffe 2008). And for McAuliffe this means that collections like *Life on Earth* (2008) are, contrary to popular opinion on the part of Mahon's critics, part of a sophisticated poetic enterprise that responds to "an ecological collapse which has already occurred" (*ibidem*).

According to Kennedy-Andrews a significant shift in Mahon's eco-thought took place with the publication of *The Hudson Letter* and *The Yellow Book* when his work moved "beyond the apocalyptic rhetoric of earlier work towards affirmation of an ecocentric vision of hopeful new beginnings" (Kennedy-Andrews 2008, 173). Kennedy-Andrews argues that compared to Mahon's "earlier speculations on post-apocalyptic new beginnings" (he has in mind "The Apotheosis of Tins" and "Thammuz"), Mahon's recent offerings presage "visions of a hopeful future, a restoration of the broken bond between the human and the natural, a return to primitive animal and vegetable origins" (*ibidem*). In Magdalena Kay's opinion – and this even if some recent publications suggest a new phase of "acceptance" – Mahon's first (and last) "eschatological concerns remain prominent" (Kay 2012). Kay further insists that Mahon's informed sense of a "post-petroleum age" means, in po-

ems like “Insomnia” (*LOE* 22-23) and “A Country Road” (*LOE* 42-43), and she focuses mainly on “Insomnia”, that Mahon is filled with an ever increasing urgency about figuring out, and confronting, the dark and darker consequences that come with “globality and, even more, planetarity” (*ibidem*).

Here, of course, we must be careful. And we must be careful because any serious discussion of the relationship between human and “other” which is based on the idea that Mahon seeks a restoration of the “broken bond between the human and the natural” might prove misleading given that Mahon’s sense of evolution, not to be confused with reconciliation, has a lot less to do with restoration than it has to do with apocalypse and reversion. Edna Longley, talking about one of Mahon’s earlier poems, “Consolations of Philosophy” (*L* 28), notes that this poem looks forward – *apocalyptically* – to Belfast “collapsing (back) into its natural environment” (Longley 1995, 298). She continues, and this aligns with what was said earlier in this chapter, that such a condition of collapse involves the likelihood that this, the “ultimate decolonization and expiation”, will involve the sea “repossessing” Belfast (*ibidem*). Lucy Collins, writing some ten years after Longley, revisited “Consolations of Philosophy” and made a real point of reinforcing the likelihood of such apocalypse with, as she puts it, “the spectre of the city collapsing into its natural environment”, “When the broken / Wreath bowls are speckled with rain water / And the grass grows wild for want of a caretaker” (Collins 2009, 261).

Barry Sloan is someone who insists – no ifs, ands, or buts – on using the term “reversionary” rather than acceding to the more anthropologically-acceptable term that is “restoration” because the latter implies man could, or should, be restored as a new and better self ready to usher in a new age of thoughtful human stewardship where eco-harmony will prevail (yet another version of all’s well that ends well) (2000). Mark Nixon also pulls no punches on the question of so-called restoration theory by making it abundantly clear that in Mahon’s work, whether recent or otherwise, the “departure of humanity” has always been “envisaged, without regret” (Nixon 2005, 51). What is more, Nixon actively promotes the belief that since the process of natural reclamation, *après* human departure, is seen as the next order of business then that’s that: “Stillness, a coming to rest, is something aspired to in many of Mahon’s poems, and more often than not it is the silence which the universe achieves after the departure of humanity that is celebrated” (52, 55). In such a post-human environment, one that is bound to post-scriptural apocalypse and end-is-nigh philosophy, the world is envisioned as a place – for one, check-out “Christmas in Kinsale” (*TYB* 56-57) – where “triumph” is measured in terms of “mud-wrestling organisms in post-historical phase”: “here the triumph of carnival, rinds and skins, / mud-wrestling organisms in post-historical phase / and the fuzzy vegetable glow of origins”.

In all this it is exceedingly important to remember (to “remember not to forget”) that Mahon’s approach to writing “the environment” begins and

ends in a place that hails from a unique eco-cultural milieu with its unique blend of fetishes, fixations, and fantasies. It is, in short type, a decidedly dark place grounded in the end-is-nigh appeal of Ulster Protestantism. Christopher Moylan is important here because he reminds us (another reminder) that whenever Mahon generalizes a certain “disillusionment with post-industrial society” his approach finds its primary source in, and is ultimately determined by, “the specific circumstances of the North of Ireland” (Moylan 2009, 259). Patricia Horton also has no doubts, none, that Mahon’s ingrained sense of eco-apocalypse is best identified as a coalescent and permanent trace of the Protestant imagination back home (Horton 2000, 357). Thus while Horton’s measure of Mahon’s semiotic roots is nothing new it is revealing that in making the case she does, that is, by revisiting those “apocalyptic moments which abound in his poetry”, she comes to underscore the fact that these ventures in the apocalyptic “often wipe out the whole symbolic order and attempt to return to a pre- or post-linguistic realm” (*ibidem*).

This is the same kind of eco-affiliation Horton refers to as one that embodies a “double sense of biblical text and written word” which emblemizes “blank nature” (360). More, Horton describes such a post-lapsarian environment as being a “chillingly silent world of ‘dark / repose’” with the natural world finally reclaiming “what civilized man has taken” (*ibidem*). She is adamant that Mahon envisions this “new world” order as an ecological realm invested in difference because it is “*no pastoral idyll*” (*ibidem*). For, Horton, then, the greater disposition of such eco-scriptural narratives cry out for a new environmental covenant consisting of reflexive scripts (and readings) which implicate and involve an understanding of nature as multiform and multiplex. And such a covenant is, as it must be, expressed from within a poetic whose iterations befit an “end time” forever grounded in Protestant the optics, or, what Peter McDonald once called, “apocalyptic extremity and ecological endtime preaching” (McDonald 2012, 486).

As Fran Brearton sees it the key issue here is that an inextinguishable part of Mahon’s “nostalgia is its yearning for a pre-historical, pre-linguistic, pre-civilized world with ‘post’ being interchangeable with ‘pre’” (Brearton 2000). Such a provocative sense of nostalgia is something Brearton likes to define as follows: “the vision is not only nostalgic, it is also apocalyptic, and within that vision he plays havoc with the illusions of security in the very language in which, for a Calvinist culture, a form of security is found” (*ibidem*). This return to nature, blank slate and all, is part of Mahon’s unwavering conviction that a post-homocentric age will supersede the narratives (and need for narratives) that have minimized, trivialized, neutralized, or anthropomorphized the innumerable realities of nature as defined. “What Will Remain” (L 26-27), the poem that precedes “Consolations of Philosophy” in *Lives*, is another piece that explores the possibilities of a post-apocalyptic world where, or at least that is the suggestion, “man” becomes a thing of the past. Begin-

ning with a statement that “What will remain after / The twilight of metals, / The flowers of fire” will be “the soft / Vegetables where our / Politics were conceived”, the poem considers the mysteries of before and after saying, “It is hard not to imagine / What it must it must have been like / Before any of us were here” (“And to what dark / Repose it will in time return”). And then comes the rub. The point where, as far back as the 1970s, Mahon could write about an ecological end time “When we will give back” what he calls “The cleared counties to the / First forest, the hills / To the hills” and “the reclaimed / Mudflats to the vigilant sea” – thereafter announces, in no uncertain terms, that “What will remain will be / The blank nature before / Whiskey, before scripture”.

So Longley, it seems, was really onto something regarding Mahon’s scriptural sense of what will come after apocalypse when a new and unfettered environment emerges with a place like Belfast finally “collapsing [back]into its natural environment” (Longley 1995, 298). Longley was also onto something when she said, in a 2005 article, “‘Altering the Past’: Northern Irish Poetry and Modern Canons”, that Northern Irish poetry “is a narrative whose time has (almost) come” though she then hesitated for a split second with, “or it’s time for a closer reading” (Longley 2005, 10). Seamus Deane, like Longley, was also onto something when he said in one of his Field Day pamphlets, “Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea”, that when it comes to talking about issues having to do with Irish literature that “Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be re-written – re-read” (Deane 1984, 58). Deane went on to say, in the same pamphlet, that such a process of rereading and rewriting would hopefully “enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness, but securely Irish” (*ibidem*). Clearly, Deane and Longley are both onto something when they suggest, albeit with different goals in mind, that we must begin to re-read Irish literature as known. Then, again, they are only onto something if – *if* – phrases like “our politics and literature” involve, as well as everything else, the magnanimous otherness of earth’s multimodal species types and the manifest principle that any worthwhile textual analysis must include a sense of readership that is endlessly eco-symptomatic in kind and recognize how much, and how often, the North’s unreclaimed nostalgias are inscribed in a pluriform of tenacious gaps, lapses, and silences, as much as they are inscribed in the availability of words on a page:

Not much distinction now between sea and land:
 some sat in dinghies rowing where they’d sown,
 navigating their own depth-refracted ground
 and scaring salmon from among the branches.
 Global warming, of course, but more like war
 as if dam-busting bombers had been here:
 aerial photographs of the worst-hit areas

showed road, bridges, basic infrastructure
 devastated, the kind of thing you expect
 in China or Louisiana but not in Cork.
 ("After the Storm", Mahon 2011, 344)

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